

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY



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THE THREE HOLY KINGS

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By: Reverend Alban Butler

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EPIPHANY, in the original Greek signifies appearance or manifestation. Three manifestations of Our Lord are jointly commemorated on this day in the office of the church.

First Manifestation. As Saint Austin observes, [1] the Epiphany is a festival in honor of the discovery Jesus Christ made of himself to the Magi (wise men) who, by a particular inspiration of Almighty God, came to adore him and bring him gifts.

Second Manifestation. We also commemorate Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Ghost descended on him in the visible form of a dove and a voice from heaven was heard at the same time saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." [2]

Third Manifestation. The third manifestation is the divine power He displayed when He at performed his first miracle, changing water into wine at the marriage at Cana, [3] "by which He manifested his glory, and His disciples believed in him."

With so many accounts, this festival should require a more-than-ordinary regard and veneration especially from us Gentiles, who, in the persons of the wise men, our first fruits and forerunners, were on this day called to the true faith and the true God.

The call to the Gentiles had been foretold in the clearest terms for many ages. David and Isaiah abound with predictions of this important event, as do the other prophets, but fulfillment of these predictions was a mercy reserved for the times of the Messiah. It was to Him, who was also the consubstantial Son of God, that the eternal Father had made the promise of all "nations for his inheritance" [4] who being born the spiritual king of the whole world, for the salvation of "all men," [5] would therefore manifest His coming both to those that "were near, and those that were afar off," [6] that is, both to Jew and Gentile.

Upon his birth, angels [7] were dispatched ambassadors to the Jews, in the persons of the poor shepherds, and a star was the divine messenger on this important errand to the Gentiles of the East, which conformed to Balaam's prophecy, [8] foretelling the coming of the Messiah by that sign.

The summons of the Gentiles to Bethlehem to pay homage to the world's Redeemer was obeyed by several whom the Scripture mentions under the name and title of Magi, or wise men; but is silent as to their number. The general opinion, supported by the authority of Saint Leo, Caesarius, Bede, and others describes three. However, the number was small, compared to the many others who saw the star shining as brightly as it shined for the wise men. The many others, instead, paid no attention to this voice of heaven: admiring, no doubt, its uncommon brightness, but culpably ignorant of the divine call it made, or hardening their hearts against its salutary impressions, overcome by their passions, and the dictates of self-love.

Today's Christians, for the same reasons, turn a deaf ear to the voice of the divine grace in their souls and harden their hearts against it in such numbers, that, notwithstanding their call, their graces, and the mysteries wrought in their favor, it is to be feared that, even among them, many "are called, but few are chosen." It was the same with the Jews, "with most of whom," Saint Paul says, "God was not well pleased." [9]

The wise men having come by the guidance of the star into Jerusalem, or near Jerusalem, suddenly see that the star disappears. We can assume they reasonably suppose they have come to their journey's end and that, upon entering the royal city, they shall in every street and corner hear the acclamations of a happy people and easily learn the way to the royal palace, made famous to all posterity by the birth of their king and Savior. Certainly, they must have been greatly surprised to find the least sign of any such solemnity. The court and city quietly continue to seek their pleasure and profit! At this unexpected circumstance, what would these weary travelers be expected to do? If they were governed by human prudence, this disappointment would have been enough to make them abandon their plan and retreat as quietly as they could to protect their reputation and avoid the mockery of the populace. A hasty retreat would also prevent resentment from the most zealous of tyrants, a man already infamous for blood. But, true virtue provides opportunities for trials and disappointments to become our most glorious triumphs. Seemingly forsaken by God, and not seeing the extraordinary star, they have no choice but to ask for information. Steady in their resolution to follow the divine call and fearless of danger, they inquire in the city with equal confidence and humility and take their inquiry into the very court of Herod himself. "Where is He that is born king of the Jews?" Does not their conduct teach us that under all difficulties of the spiritual kind, we have options to go to God's appointed spiritual guides for their advice and direction? To "obey and be subject to them," [10] so God may lead us to Himself, as He guided the wise men to Bethlehem by the directions of the priests of the Jewish church.

The whole nation of the Jews were at that time in the highest expectation of the Messiah's appearance among them, knowing of Jacob's and Daniel's prophecies, even foretelling the place of His birth. The wise men, by the interposition of Herod's authority, quickly learned, from the unanimous voice of the Sanhedrim, or great council of the Jews, that Bethlehem was the place that was to be honored with His birth, as was pointed out by the prophet Micheas [11] several ages before. How sweet and adorable is the conduct of divine providence! He teaches saints His will by the mouths of impious ministers and furnishes Gentiles with the means to admonish and confound the blindness of the Jews.

Graces are lost on carnal and hardened souls, however. At the time of Christ's birth, Herod had reigned for almost thirty years. He was a monster of cruelty, ambition, craft, and dissimulation. Old age and sickness had exasperated his jealous mind in an unusual manner. He dreaded nothing so much as the appearance of the Messiah, Whom the citizens envisioned to be, at the least, a temporal prince. Herod could consider this Messiah in no other light than that of a rival and pretender to his crown. No wonder he was startled at the news of this birth. All Jerusalem, likewise, instead of rejoicing at such happy tidings, were alarmed and disturbed with him. We abhor their baseness, but we show similar symptoms of the baneful influence of human nature that causes us to act against what is right. Likewise, in Herod we see how extravagantly blind and foolish was his ambition. The Divine Infant came not to deprive Herod of his earthly kingdom, but to offer him one that is eternal and to teach him a holy contempt of all worldly pomp and grandeur. Again, how senseless and extravagant a folly was it to form designs against those of God himself who confounds the wisdom of the world, baffles the vain projects of men, and laughs their rules to scorn.

Are there no Herods today? Are there no people who are enemies to the spiritual kingdom of Christ in their hearts? The typical tyrant, to ward off the blow that threatens him, has recourse to his usual arts of cunning and disguising his true feelings, thoughts, and intentions. In this case, Herod pretends an ardent desire to pay homage to the newborn king, and covers his wicked intention of taking away His life under the false pretense of going in person to adore him.

After asking about the star and requesting that the wise men come back and inform him where the child was to be found, he dismissed them to the place determined by the chief priests and scribes. Herod was then near his death; but as a man lives, so does he usually die. The prospect of imminent eternity seldom works as incentive to produce a true and sincere change of heart in habitual sinners.

The wise men discussed it with the Sanhedrim and followed their instructions although the Jewish leaders' example gave the wise men little encouragement to continue searching. Not one single priest or scribe was inclined to accompany them in seeking and paying homage to their own king.

The truths and maxims of religion depend not on the morals of those who preach them. Instead, they spring from a higher source--the wisdom and sincerity of God himself. When a message undoubtedly comes from God, we cannot ignore that message just because the deliverer of the message is guilty of misdeeds. In fact, immediate compliance is better proof of our faith and confidence in God and will better serve us by escorting us into God's special care and protection, as escorted the wise men. For, no sooner than the wise men left Jerusalem, to encourage their faith and zeal and to direct their travels, God again showed them the star they had been following. The star continued to go before them until it conducted them to the very place where they were finally able to see and adore their God and Savior. Here, the star ceasing its advanced movement and its probable sinking lower in the sky, tells them in its mute language, "Here shall you find the new-born king." The holy men, with an unshaken and steady faith and transported by spiritual joy, entered the poor space, rendered more glorious by this birth than the most sumptuous and stately palace in the universe. There they found the child with his mother. They prostrated themselves, they adored him, they poured forth their souls in his presence in the deepest sentiments of praise, thanksgiving, and a total sacrifice of themselves. So far from being shocked at the poverty of the place, and at his unkingly appearance, their faith rises and gathers strength on the sight of obstacles that, humanly speaking, should extinguish that faith. Their faith strengthens their understanding; it penetrates those curtains of poverty, infancy, weakness, and abjection; it casts them on their faces, as unworthy to look up to this star, this God of Jacob; they declare and avow him under this disguise of an infant to be the only and eternal God. They recognize the excess of his goodness in becoming man. They recognize the excess of human misery that requires such a great a humiliation of the Lord of glory for its relief. Saint Leo extols their faith and devotion by saying, "When a star had conducted them to adore Jesus they did not find him commanding devils, or raising the dead, or restoring sight to the blind, or speech to the dumb, or employed in any divine actions; but a silent babe, under the care of a solicitous mother, giving no sign of power, but exhibiting a miracle of humility."

The Magi, in accordance with the custom of the eastern nations, where great princes are not to be approached without gifts, present to Jesus, as a token of homage, the richest produce their countries afforded--gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gold acknowledged

his regal power; the incense recognized his Godhead; and the myrrh was a testimony that he had become man to redeem the world.

When the holy kings were about to return home, God, who saw the hypocrisy and malicious designs of Herod, warned them and diverted them from their intent to inform the people of Jerusalem where the child was to be found. Therefore, in their final act of fidelity and grace in that place, they returned not to Herod's court but, instead, left their hearts with their infant Savior and took another road back into their own country. Similarly, if we want to persevere in possessing the graces bestowed on us, we must resolve from this day to hold no correspondence with a sinful world, the irreconcilable enemy to Jesus Christ. We must instead take a route that lies a distance from it--that route that is marked out for us by the saving truths of the gospel. Pursuing this with an unshaken confidence in God's grace and merits, we shall safely arrive at our heavenly country.

It has never been questioned that the holy Magi spent the rest of their lives in the fervent service of God. The ancient author of the imperfect comment on Saint Matthew, among the works of Saint Chrysostom, says that they were baptized in Persia by Saint Thomas the Apostle and became preachers of the gospel. Their bodies were said to have been moved to Constantinople under the first Christian emperors. They were then conveyed to Milan, where the place they were deposited is still shown in the Dominicans' church of that city. The emperor Frederick Barbarossa having taken Milan, then had them moved to Cologne in Germany, in the twelfth century.

NOTES

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| 1. St. Aug. Serm. 203, ol. 64, de div. | 7. Luke ii. 10, 11. |
| 2. Matt. iii. 17. | 8. Num. xxiv. 17. |
| 3. Jo. ii. II. | 9. I Cor. x. 5. |
| 4. Ps. ii. 8. | 10. Heb. xiii. 17. |
| 5. I Tim. ii. 4. | 11. Ch. v. 2. |
| 6. Eph. ii. 17. | |



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